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C O N F I D E N T I A L YEREVAN 002182

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/SNEC, EUR/CACEN

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [AM](#) [AJ](#)

SUBJECT: CURIOUS TIMING OF GOAM PRESS RELEASE ON
NAKHICHEVAN INCIDENT

Classified By: CDA A.F. Godfrey for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

11. (C) The GOAM distributed a press release on December 15 denouncing what it called "barbarous" vandalism of Armenian cultural monuments by Azeri soldiers in the Nakhichevan region along the Azerbaijan-Armenia border. The statement, citing reports by Armenian priests, claimed that 100 Azerbaijani soldiers had destroyed Armenian "Khatchkars" (tombstones in the form of crosses) in an Armenian cemetery along the banks of the Arax river on December 15. The press release suggested that the actions were part of an Azerbaijani campaign to "erase traces of Armenian history" in that part of Azerbaijan. (Note: We have been not been able to confirm these reports or the veracity of photographs allegedly taken on December 15 of Azerbaijani soldiers "armed with sledgehammers." End Note.) The first announcement on December 15 came in the form of an early afternoon press release from Armenia's Embassy in Tehran. The MFA distributed the release to journalists later the same day on the margins of Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian's press conference summing up the December 14-15 visit of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs. Local press carried the story December 15 and 16, highlighting the press release's call on the international community to "prevent cultural genocide by Azerbaijan." Post will forward a full text of the press release to the Department.

12. (C) Comment: While details of the alleged incident are still unclear, the timing of the announcement raises serious questions about the flow of information and the decision to distribute the release during Oskanian's press conference. Heads-up calls to the Embassy from the MFA and the Armenian Assembly of America suggest that the MFA was especially interested in ensuring that we had noted the information. On a day filled with upbeat news about prospects for a resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the MFA's decision to circulate third-hand reports in an official, strongly-worded press release is likely to anger nationalist elements in Armenia and spur a response from counterparts in Baku.
GODFREY